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SUBJECT: A MARINER'S VIEW OF THE TURKISH STRAITS

REF: ISTANBUL 262

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1. (U) In meetings with Consulate and Embassy officers last week, British Petroleum maritime consultant Vice Admiral Sir Christopher Morgan provided a mariner's view of the issues the Turkish straits pose for transiting oil tankers. Morgan, who accompanied a BP Suezmax tanker through the straits at the height of last winter's storms, spoke highly of the newly installed Vessel Traffic System (VTS) and sees few risks in the actual transit of either the Dardanelles or the Bosphorus, provided that there is no oncoming traffic on the latter. Rather, he argues that the key safety issue centers on the anchorages at the entrances to the Dardanelles, particularly at the northern end where loaded tankers can back up. At one point during his transit, nearly 60 loaded tankers were jostling for position in a narrow anchorage. During the fierce storms that buffeted the area at the end of January, several of these ships dragged anchor and nearly collided with their neighbors. In Morgan's view, this anchorage policy "is more risky than the combined risk of each and every individual tanker transit through the Turkish Straits." End Summary.

2. (U) Vice Admiral Morgan, accompanied by Mike Bilbo from BP's Istanbul office, met with us on September 16 to discuss his experience transiting the straits at the height of last winter's storms. He accompanied a BP chartered Suezmax tanker, the MT Max Jacob, which loaded at the Georgian port of Supsa on January 10 and then proceeded west across the Black Sea towards the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, entering the northern strait on January 15. Morgan, who recently retired after five years as Director General of Britain's Chamber of Shipping, prepared a report on his experience in March that assessed the risks the Turkish straits pose for transiting ships and the operations of Turkey's Vessel Traffic Management system and other maritime safety measures. Aside from one unfortunate incident, and a number of technical critiques, including the need for pilots to join the ship before they are actually committed to entering the straits and the relative inadequacy of the tugs used by Turkish coastal authorities, he was largely complimentary of the professionalism and knowledge of the Turkish maritime authorities with whom he worked. In particular, he had high praise for the new VTS, saying it provided ship captains with useful, accurate information.

3. (SBU) Anchorage Risks: Morgan's major safety concerns centered on the risks posed by the "cramming" of large numbers of tankers into inadequate anchorages as backups built up during this winter's storms. By chance, he found himself at the Gelibolu anchorage at the northern end of the Dardanelles at the very height of this winter's delays, when average waits reached nearly 30 days and 66 ships were waiting to transit, both northbound and southbound. The MT Max Jacob reached Gelibolu on January 17, after an uneventful run through the Bosphorus, a transit that Morgan describes as posing "few problems for a well run Suezmax," provided that (as Turkish regulations require) there is no oncoming traffic. The voyage swiftly became more arduous, however, as at Gelibolu the ship joined a queue of vessels containing some 26 million barrels of crude oil that were waiting to transit the Dardanelles.

4. (SBU) Morgan characterized the most stressful period of the voyage as the time when the ship was maneuvering among these anchored vessels to find its own mooring area. The ship was subsequently stuck for ten days in the anchorage by fierce winter storms with winds of over 50 knots that ravaged the area, and led to closure of the straits. During that period, several ships dragged anchor and came within little more than a ship's length of their neighbors before being able to get underway. Morgan noted that in meetings with government officials in Ankara he will argue that a new designated anchorage south of the separation zone is urgently needed at Gelibolu to ease this congestion. In addition, given the dangers the anchorages pose, he argued that Turkey should reduce the vessel buildup by more efficiently using daylight hours in good weather and by easing its "excessive"

requirement of an hour and a half separation between tankers during their transit. An hour, he suggested, would be sufficient, though he noted that this is an argument that the industry does not expect to win. More likely to win official sanction, he added, is a recommendation that when traffic builds up the straits operate in one direction for an entire day, rather than half a day. The latter procedure costs several hours from the shortened winter day, as ships wait for vessels moving in the opposite direction to clear the channel.

15. (SBU) Comment: Given his relationship with the industry, Morgan's recommendation that transit separation spacing be reduced so that more vessels can make the passage in a day is not surprising. However, his point about the risks posed by the anchorages seems difficult to refute, and is dramatically illustrated by radar printouts from January which depict dozens of ships, many nearly on top of each other. Morgan indicated he will push the anchorage issue in particular in his meetings in Ankara. Given Turkish concerns about straits' safety and congestion, he does not expect his argument regarding separation times to win much traction. Suggestions by the press and some observers that the GOT may be excessively regulating traffic to purposefully delay shipping to further make the point on congestion show that this could induce a dangerous outcome. End Comment.

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